

level



MEGAN COPE



Toponymic Interventions #2 Kulin Nations

Walking around the Gorge at Stradbroke Island, it becomes evident where the powerful channeling of place in Megan Cope's work comes from. Megan Cope is a Quandamooka (Stradbroke Island) woman who spent a great portion of her formative years in Tasmania, and an investigation into her bodies of work sees common threads between water, place, and of powerful reclamations. Shimmering hues of blue that not only mimic the water around Stradbroke Island, but imply an ecology existent within it, the sublime brutality of nature using potent and peaceful markings.

Around the time that American cartographer, Christopher Colles' daughter, Eliza Colles was engraving maps,¹ Matthew Flinders and George Bass were circumnavigating the island in which Megan Cope spent a great portion of her childhood. A few years later, Flinders would step foot onto what is now known to non-Indigenous Australian's as Stradbroke Island.

Cope's paintings, using a blue wash and series of effervescent dots allude to a sea level rise of 5m, taking note of our fragile sense of place and our footing in it. Appropriating military maps from the 1920s through to the '50s, Cope also references place by exploring what then, Australians saw as a discriminate threat of possession by outside forces. The war was raging, but who rightfully owned the land?

In dealing with issues of speculative water level rises, Cope references stories which were told to her by her relations on Stradbroke Island.² It's hard to imagine, but in a time long before colonisation, Moreton Bay was known to have been a valley unfilled by the vast expanse of blue that it is today. This water rise isn't illegitimate, under the persistent entropy of nature - season's change, nothing is ever the same.





In her more recent video works, Cope superimposes place names and language groups of the original inhabitants of certain places around Australia. As we all well know, place names have a great influence on place.³ Cope's visual reclaiming of place by renaming the de-named command a respect on the history of regions and the ancestors that inhabit them. In her paintings, we see these place names, or toponyms, placed onto the surface of the painting. In her video works, Cope projects these toponyms onto the physical landscape.

The first of these video projections was played out in Tambo, a remote town in Queensland's Central West. On speaking with locals in the area, Cope deduced that their perceptions of the towns history were well skewed. As the locals claimed "there never really was any Aboriginal people here, they roamed around", Cope was pushed to research the Indigenous history of the area, later projecting the names of language groups onto the landscape. The image of ethereal place names flickering across the ghostly Red River gums of rural Australia induced a sadness in the viewers.

In Cope's most recent work, *Toponymic Interventions*, she projected onto significant sites for Aboriginal Australian's around what is now urban Melbourne. Included in the projections are the language groups and Aboriginal place names and the words, *Gammin Dutigalla - Batman Robbin'* referring to what the history books have described a landmark event in the history of colonisation (Batman's Treaty), but is heavily disputed outside written histories. It references the land around Melbourne which Batman claimed, and the concurrent treaty he struck with Aboriginals on the then ungoverned land. David Day, in his book *Claiming a Continent* describes the situations as thus:

Batman's treaty was a calculated commercial transaction designed to establish his claim over choice land that lay beyond the Government's declared boundary of

location. It was this that drove him to make the unique gesture of a treaty that recognised, however inadequately, the prior rights of the original inhabitants... the invaders could hardly believe their good fortune. 4

For most urban blackfellas, the word "gammin" infers "bullshit". *Dutigalla* translates into English as Treaty, and we can imagine what Batman had been robbin'. The spot where Queens Bridge lays is that of the Wurundjeri people, and there once lay a waterfall on this site. The waterfall was dynamited to make for the erection of the Queens Bridge. As Cope was projecting the place names and language groups of the Kulin Nations, serendipitously, firecrackers from a nearby festival started cracking in the background. These firecrackers, inadvertently referencing the dynamite activated the space in the way that it bought forth the site's history, a quiet nod to the ancestors who inhabit the spot.

Cope's projections decolonise the physical spaces in which they are projected, and point out the inconsistencies in written histories. They transcend history in the way that they float in space and reference the unspoken, all the while implying something very real.

by Sarah Werkmeister

1 Colles is rumoured to have been America's first female map maker.

2 Indigenous history is often passed down verbally, there being no physical recording of events, but a trust in Elders to pass down stories in truth.

3 For example, the current area of Logan in Brisbane's south is considering changing its name due to a disputably bad reputation - <http://www.couriermail.com.au/questnews/can-a-change-of-name-alter-logans-image/story-fn8ygho7-1226265087032>

4 Day, D. *Claiming a Continent: A New History of Australia*, 1996, Harper Collins, Sydney, Australia. pp96.

Megan Cope

Toponymic Interventions #2 Kulin Nations

8 - 10 March 2013

Parer Place Screen, QUT Kelvin Grove, Brisbane

LEVEL

info@levelari.org

www.levelari.org

Copyright 2013. LEVEL, the artist, writer and photographer.

Images: Megan Cope 'Toponymic Interventions #2 Kulin Nations', 2013.

All images © the artist.

LEVEL has received financial assistance from the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland and is supported by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory governments.



Australian Government
Visual Arts and Craft Strategy
Queensland



Queensland
Government